DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 502 CS 214 631

AUTHOR Chin, Susan Ho
TITLE Pockmarks and Pustules on the Face of Multicultural Readers.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (84th, Orlando, FL, November 16-21, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Bias; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Context; *Ethnocentrism; Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; *Reading Material Selection; Student Attitudes; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Multicultural Materials

ABSTRACT

Using multicultural readers for writing courses runs two risks--"pockmarks and pustules." Pockmarks refer to problems with the multicultural readers or books themselves, while pustules refers to characteristics associated with readers or the ones who read the books. Pockmark No. 1 is that readings may create negative opinions or stereotypes in the minds of the readers. Students who read about areas of the world about which they have no prior knowledge or about cultures with which they have had no interaction are particularly vulnerable to misperceptions. Pockmark No. 2 is that readings may shock a student and/or reinforce his or her ethnocentric sense that "our" way is better. Pustule No. 1 is that most read especially young people, are egocentric, which means they have trouble relating to that which is not the here and now. They often view a reading selection with skepticism or regard it as fiction. Pustule No. 2 is that an individual's assumptions and prejudice interfere with perception, and even with reading comprehension. Pustule No. 3 is that each person perceives, evaluates, and judges other cultures through the filter of his or her own culture. The solutions to these problems requires that instructors carefully evaluate the texts they are using. They should strive to help their students realize that while cultures are different, they are all equal, and no one culture is better than another. In addition, they must use outside resources, such as atlases, films, videos, photographs, photographic essays, and cultural studies, to provide context. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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A paper presented at the 1995 NCTE National Convention in Orlando, Florida, by Susan Ho Chin

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Multicultural readers are collections of writings about the United States and other countries or cultures. The authors may be well-known, lesser-known, or unknown to the average American reader, and the majority of the authors are native to the country or culture about which they are writing. These authentic voices represent a broad spectrum of geographic regions, nations, races, ethnic groups, linguistic and cultural communities, professions, socio-economic classes, and religions. These books are fun to use because they include a diverse sampling of themes, topics, and issues in a multitude of forms: autobiographies, diaries, essays, interviews, journalistic articles, memoirs, photographic essays, plays, poetry, speeches, and short stories.

So, all in all multicultural readers should create an exciting reading experience, one which can engage readers in critical thinking about a variety of issues and/or about their world, themselves, and others. When students read about other cultures and discover similarities and/or differences between their own culture and other cultures, they often begin to learn more about their own culture. We might call this a cultural competency. Unfortunately, however, there are also a number of serious problems.

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As we all know, a <u>reader</u> is an individual who reads and a <u>reader</u> is also the book which we read. This can result in ambiguity, so I use the terms pockmark and pustule.

Pockmark

I use pockmark to refer to problems with multicultural readers or the books themselves, and when we examine these readers, we can see that there are two major pockmarks.

Pockmark #1 is that readings may create negative opinions or stereotypes in the minds of the readers. Students who read about areas of the world for which they have no prior knowledge or about cultures with which they have had no interaction are susceptible, and particularly vulnerable are monocultural classrooms, in which the teacher and students are of the same cultural/racial heritage.

Suppose, for example, the readings are about India, a country and culture unfamiliar to many Americans.

The Grass Eaters is a story about human degradation and suffering in Calcutta: an educated man lives in a pipe and eats twice-daily meals of boiled grass and a rice gruel, and Giribala is about a Bengali woman whose husband sells their young daughters into prostitution. Stories like these paint a negative and one-sided portrayal of life in India. However, unless the educators are knowledgeable about India and its people, they are not in a position to dispell the misperceptions generated by these selections. Regrettably, in my review of multicultural readers currently available, I found no selections which describe the virtues of India. As we all know, negative images often result in negative stereotypes.

Pockmark #2 is that, intended or unintended by the author, the readings may shock a student and/or reinforce a student's ethnocentric attitudes and strengthen beliefs that "our" way is

better. Selections such as El Salvador: The Mechanism of Terror, Initiated into a Tribe of Iban Headhunters, and The Initiation of a Maasai Warrior depict the rigors of life in El Salvador, Borneo, and Tanzania respectively and can reaffirm readers' feelings that America is the best country in the world and other places and other ways of life are inferior or barbaric.

Pustule

If pockmarks refer to problems with the multicultural readers or books themselves, then pustules refer to characteristics associated with readers or the ones who read the books. These characteristics may block a student's reading comprehension and also interfere with what SHOULD be the primary benefit derived from using multicultural readers - the development of intercultural consciousness and sensitivity.

Pustule #1 is that most readers, especially young people, are egocentric, and they are also concerned with the here and the now, so students often experience difficulty relating to a custom or place which falls outside their immediate world. Consequently, they often view a reading selection with disbelief or regard it as fiction. One example is The Circumcision of Girls; the first time I used this essay in class, my students were horrified and absolutely refused to believe that this practice exists in the "real world," (their world) and even if it did exist, they felt it had no relevance in terms of life in DeKalb Country, Georgia.

Pustule #2 is that an individual's assumptions and prejudices interfere with perception. For example in Graduation by Maya Angelou, the white guest speaker at a commencement ceremony at a

black school, proudly announces that the white high school will soon receive new microscopes and up-to-date lab equipment and that the black school will have new home economics and workshop equipment. In other words, it does not occur to this white speaker that African American children can become future scientists, inventors, or artists; he perceives them only as unskilled or semi-skilled laborers.

Now, for a change of pace, please read the handout which is being distributed. What did the farmer assume? And why did the man from Tonga want the pony? Note that Tongans were introduced to the horse by white missionaries who were accustomed to having meat on their menu.

Certainly, if assumptions and prejudices interfere with perception, then assumptions and prejudices can also interfere in reading comprehension.

Pustule #3 is that each of us perceives, evaluates, and judges other cultures through the <u>filter</u> of our own culture. Nowhere is this judgment more evident than in respect to food, one of the most visible components of culture. Consider your reactions to being served any of the following: squid, jellyfish, iguanas, grasshoppers, slugs, or dogs, each of which is a food item in one or more cultures of the world.

Cultural filtering, which is synonymous with cultural conditioning, not only impacts on our gastronomic choices, but cultural filtering also affects how we <u>react</u> to what others eat. Negative reaction to what others eat is a reflection of our cultural insensitivity.

Evaluating and judging other cultures through the filter of our own culture is a major stumbling block to comprehending the values, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of other cultures, and it is these values, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs, invisible to the eye, that constitute the greater part of culture. Compare culture to an iceberg. Only 30% of culture is visible to the eye: the food, language, and customs of a people; 70% is below the surface: attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs.

Pustule #4 is what happens when prejudices, assumptions, stereotypes, egocentricity, and ethnocentricity lead individuals to divide the world into "them" and "us," and it is harmful and even dangerous when anyone believes that "us" is superior.

Having examined briefly some of the problems, let's now look at solutions in terms of the books and in terms of instruction.

With regard to the books themselves, it goes without saying that multicultural readers need to be examined very, very carefully for their depiction of various cultures.

With regard to instruction, we need to focus on moving students beyond ethnocentricity and prejudice. Our objective should be recognizing and understanding that while cultures or ways of life are different, they are all equal, and no <u>one</u> culture or way of life is better than any other culture or way of life.

First, as educators, we need to select readings with which we ourselves feel comfortable, and our comfort/discomfort level may be based on our prejudices and/or personal experiences. For example, being Asian, I am comfortable discussing Asian culture, and having

lived in West Africa and in Central America, I am also comfortable talking about African or Hispanic culture. On the other hand, I am uncomfortable talking about subjects such as free sex; perhaps this is because of my cultural heritage, my generation, my religion. Obviously the answer is all of the above.

Returning to the subject of multicultural readings, what is important is that in order for us to move forward, we need to use factual information to dispell myths and misperceptions. A good source for information is Culturgrams, published by the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University. Each culturgram provides summaries of a country's history and economy as well as brief notes on customs and courtesies, population and language groups, and life-styles within the country.

A major step in moving forward is combating stereotypes. Instead of avoiding the issue of stereotypes, take class time to examine the general nature of stereotypes and their causes and effects and/or dissect specific stereotypes - why they originated and why they persist. Our goal should NOT be replacing negative stereotypes with positive ones; rather, our goal should be eliminating stereotypes and helping students to accept people as individuals, individuals who exist within a cultural framework.

Cultural frameworks vary widely and affect not only what we eat and how we react to what others eat, but also how we view public and private space (we all recognize that in casual conversations Hispanics tend to stand a lot closer together than Americans do) and how we carry on conversations (American

conversations can be likened to tennis: speakers lobby a conversational "ball" back and forth; in contrast, Japanese conversations are more like bowling, in which each participant awaits his/her turn. Further, age, gender, and position are contributing factors in creating the rotation schedule). Cultural frameworks also affect how we look at time. In the United States, promptness is a virtue, but Robert Levine's Social Time: The Heartbeat of Culture tells us that in Brazil, tardiness is a measurement of one's status and success.

Ideally, we should be able to create a cultural framework through reading a series of culturally connected reading selections. However, by their very nature, multicultural readers usually contains only one or two selections about a particular culture. Reading only a selection or two about a culture can result in a reader's taking the selection or selections out of cultural context, much as an eavesdropper can take a phrase or sentence out of context. Often, when a story is removed from its cultural context, it becomes just a story rather than a reflection of cultural thought and philosophy.

So, how do we create a cultural framework? By utilizing as many other resources as possible: atlases, films, videos, photographs and photographic essays, cultural studies, and festivities sponsored by cultural and ethnic groups, and guest speakers. It is important, however, to recognize that the perspective of speakers varies, depending on whether they are first, second, or third generation. I want to take a moment to expand on what I mean.

The first generation identifies itself in terms of cultural heritage, such as Italian or Vietnames. Many immigrants and refugees gravitate toward ethnic enclaves (Little Italy or Little Saigon) because they seek the comfort of those who speak the same language and share the same culture. However, their offspring (second generation) who have been acculturated cross the borders of these ethnic communities to integrate into mainstream America. Those who leave return, in varying degrees, for holidays, celebrations, and shopping excursions for ethnic spices and foodstuffs; they think of themselves as Italian Americans or Vietnamese Americans. The assimilation of the third generation into American culture may be so thorough that members of this generation may even lack the language to communicate with their grandparents, and surnames of physical characteristics are the primary markers of ethnicity. Those who are third generation think of themselves as Americans first and Italians Americans or Vietnamese Americans second.

It is also important to demonstrate reality and relevance. As I mentioned earlier, my students refused to believe that the practice of female circumcision does exist. I have to admit that I lucked out because about a day or two after we finished reading the essay, there was a court case which made the local news in a big way. A plaintiff wanted his marriage annulled on the grounds that it was not consummated because of his wife's closed genitals. At stake was whether she should share in the $300,000 he had won in the Florida lottery. Every day, the students wanted an update on the case.

Linking a reading selection to its cultural framework and demonstrating reality and relevance are vital because when we neglect to make the connection, and more importantly, when we fail to respect and value the other culture, we fail to foster development of intercultural consciousness and sensitivity. In other words, we fail to build bridges of intercultural understanding.

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DeVry Institute of Technology
250 North Arcadia Avenue
Decatur (Atlanta), Georgia 30030-2198
(404) 292-7900

Susan Ho Chin
1994 NCTE National Convention
Orlando, Florida

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A California farmer wanted to sell a pony, so he placed an ad in the local newspaper. This farmer felt that money was less important than placing the pony with a good family. After having talked with about eight prospects, the farmer decided to sell the pony to a man from Tonga because this man had been so eager and had placed so much importance on having the pony for his son's birthday party.

The farmer telephoned the buyer, and the next day the man from Tonga drove up in a truck. The buyer's son was so excited. "A pony for my birthday party," he shouted over and over. When the pony was in the back of the truck, the father clubbed the pony over the head, and grinning at each other, father and son drove off.

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